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ABSTRACT

As a means of improving the reading program at Barry College, Miami Shores, the writer investigated the perceptions of experienced teachers in Dade County, a heterogeneous community whose schools provide a microcosm of national educational needs. The project was intended to determine whether teachers in public schools were aware of specific, differentiated needs in relation to the ethnic or racial background of their pupils. Schools were divided into three types: black, white, or Cuban. A questionnaire was administered to 131 teachers in schools in which 75 percent of the pupils in each school could be identified as belonging to the racial or ethnic group which their school represented. An analysis of the responses showed that the teachers were almost unanimous in their selection of five basic needs for reading instruction: (a) an understanding of children's individual differences, both intellectual and emotional; (b) development of the ability to use classroom assessment techniques to determine children's readiness, instructional, and independent levels in relation to reading; (c) ability to diagnose children's needs in the basic skills areas; (d) knowledge of variety of techniques for teaching sight vocabulary as well as decoding skills; and (e) development of ability to plan and implement a reading program to meet pupils' individual needs. (Tables are included in the text.) (JA)

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NEEDS OF READING TEACHERS IN A TRI-ETHNIC DISTRICT

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Educators have long complained that pre-service teacher training in college is oriented toward the middle-class, native white child, with little concern for the problems of culturally-disadvantaged pupils. The problem is particularly acute in major urban areas, where teachers may be called upon to work with children whose backgrounds vary widely from year to year.

Experienced teachers in multi-racial, multi-ethnic school systems are often quite aware of the shortcomings of their preparation. In general, educators in the field express less interest in the theoretical aspects of education, and indicate more need for practical applications of teaching techniques appropriate for children from disadvantaged minority cultures.

In recent years there have been attempts by some colleges and universities to provide more relevant instruction for undergraduates who anticipate teaching in communities made up of different racial and ethnic groups. Shankman reported that such a program at Temple University resulted in "better understanding... as schools were staffed with better trained teachers, who really wanted to teach in the inner-city schools and were aware of their special problems."[1]

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Dade County (Miami), Florida, is a heterogeneous community whose schools provide a microcosm of national educational needs. Court-ordered desegregation of teaching staffs and students in 1970 brought Cuban refugees together with whites and blacks from across the country. A demographic study by the Dade County Community Improvement Program determined in 1972 that 23.6% of the residents were Spanish-speaking, 15% were black, and 61.4% were classified as whites, Indians, and Orientals. The study termed the community "tri-ethnic."[2]

As a means of improving the reading program at Barry College, Miami Shores, the writer investigated the perceptions of experienced teachers in Dade County. The project was intended to determine whether teachers in the public schools were aware of specific, differentiated needs in relation to the ethnic or racial backgrounds of their pupils.

Procedures

An instrument incorporating 143 reading objectives was developed in accordance with the levels of sophistication specified by Bloom[3] and Krathwohl.[4] The document was administered to 25 reading specialists, consultants, and college professors in the county and validated through the use of Thurstone scaling techniques. Each item was rated separately as to its importance to classroom reading teachers. Medians and interquartile ranges were calculated, and 22 affective and 33 cognitive items were found to rank high in value and low in dispersion. These items

were randomly organized into a 55-item questionnaire. Each objective was followed by a four-point Likert-type scale, labeled (1) Essential, (2) Important, but not essential, (3) Relatively unimportant, and (4) Should not be included in a pre-service reading course.

A contextual design with stratified cluster sampling was planned with the aid of one of the district directors and his staff. The elementary schools in the district were stratified by racial or ethnic majority as black, white, or Cuban. Schools that had been paired or limited in grade range to achieve racial balance were eliminated from the strata.

Six schools were randomly selected, two from each of the three ethnic groups. At least 75% of the pupils in each school could be identified as belonging to the racial or ethnic group which their school represented. The questionnaires were administered to a total of 131 teachers in mid-year during teacher workshop periods. Because of desegregation quotas, each school staff was approximately 75% white and 25% black.

Results

An analysis of the responses showed that the teachers of the three different groups were almost unanimous in their selection of five basic needs for reading instruction:

1. An understanding of children's individual differences, both intellectual and emotional.

2. Development of the ability to use classroom assessment techniques to determine children's readiness, instructional, and independent levels in relation to reading.
3. Development of the ability to diagnose children's needs in the basic skills areas.
4. Knowledge of a variety of techniques for teaching sight vocabulary as well as decoding skills.
5. Development of the ability and the desire to plan and implement a reading program to meet pupils' individual needs.

The Kruskal-Wallis One-way Analysis of Variance was used to ascertain whether differences in perceived needs among the three groups of teachers were significant at the .05 level of confidence.[5] Questionnaire items which showed significant differences are listed in the following tables. The percentages represent the proportion of teachers in each category who considered the objective to be essential for their pupils.

Table 1

Significantly Different Needs in
Predominantly Black Schools

Item	Black Schools	Cuban Schools	White Schools
Understand the effect of emotional problems on children's reading performance.	81%	54%	44%
Conceptualize basic principles of child growth and development in relation to reading achievement.	57%	36%	11%
Become aware that not all children learn to read in the same way.	90%	71%	39%
Participate in discussions of common problems with colleagues.	52%	31%	11%
Recognize the distinction between good and poor reading materials for pupils.	76%	54%	33%
Apply principles of behavioral psychology to classroom problems.	60%	32%	21%

Table 2

Significantly Different Needs in Predominantly Cuban Schools

Item	Cuban Schools	Black Schools	White Schools
Know a variety of techniques for teaching phonics skills to children.	89%	67%	56%
Be able to provide specific examples of words at appropriate levels for the most important phonics generalizations.	57%	52%	17%
Know the sounds represented by the traditional alphabet.	79%	71%	39%
Teach children to read for a variety of purposes.	72%	32%	36%

Teachers of children in the predominantly white schools indicated only one need which differed significantly from those of the instructors of the other ethnic groups. The item, "Be familiar with standardized reading tests in common use in the elementary grades," was labeled "Essential" by 64% of the teachers in the white schools, 40% of the teachers in the black schools, and 24% of the teachers in the Cuban schools.

Conclusions

Teachers who worked with classroom reading in the schools with a majority of black children apparently felt that their most

important needs were in the affective domain. Their undergraduate preparation, in their view, did not prepare them adequately to cope with the differences between their own backgrounds and those of their students. This may well be a problem in any school system that undergoes rapid desegregation of teaching staffs, and suggests the need for specific information about and exposure to inner-city children during the preservice period.

Three of the four objectives specific to teachers of Cuban pupils dealt with English language sounds. Apparently this was in recognition of the problems of teaching a phonics-based reading program to children with different native languages.

The emphasis by teachers in predominantly white schools on standardized tests in reading probably indicates their apprehensiveness about current public attitudes toward education. In private conversations with the investigator, many teachers expressed concerns about "accountability," "national assessment," and "performance-based criteria for evaluation."

As a total group, the teachers who participated in the study demonstrated a desire to provide their students with a solid foundation in literal reading, with attention to the needs of individual children with decoding and comprehension problems. There was little interest in learning more about other approaches, such as the Initial Teaching Alphabet, linguistic reading, or teaching machines. The great majority appeared to be more

interested in improving their skills in implementing a relatively traditional classroom reading program.

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